



Shaping a better future for all

Submission to Australian bureau of statistics

Cultural Diversity Questions
in the next Australian Census

Submission to the consultation on cultural diversity questions in the next Australian Census

Background

Multicultural Development Australia (MDA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) consultation on cultural diversity questions in the next Australian Census. MDA is one of the largest non-government multicultural organisations in Queensland. As the Queensland lead agency for refugee settlement, we work with refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants, as well as their local communities. As an evidence and research informed organisation, the lack of reliable multicultural data hampers our efforts to plan, implement and monitor our work locally and strategically. Not only is the multicultural service sector badly impacted by the lack of quality multicultural data, but the entire Australian human service sector is disadvantaged by this lack of reliable data. With the growing culturally and linguistically diverse population in Australia, this is not only bad practice, but we are concerned that lack of data masks the true picture of the Australian population. In our submission we call for a review of the cultural and linguistic diversity data set so that a single indicator can be adopted into the data dictionaries, collections and standards across government and across Australia and that this single variable can be used in the next Census.

Limitations of current standards

MDA and many other organisations have identified that the current *National Standards for Cultural and Language Diversity* are unable to adequately capture the complex cultural diversity that exists in the Australian population. The identification of cultural and ethnic groups is essential to targeting effective government and non-government policy, programs and services. However, the variables 'country of birth' and 'main language other than English' cannot identify many important and disadvantaged population groups.

Three priority population groups in Queensland and perhaps also elsewhere, are very poorly identified by 'country of birth' and 'main language other than English':

- refugees (persecuted minority ethnic groups often stay for extended lengths of time in a second or third country and their children are subsequently born in those second or third countries and may speak the host country's language).
- Australian South Sea Islander people are born in Australia and speak English. Queensland has Australia's largest Australian South Sea Islander population.
- Pacific Islander and Maori people migrate through New Zealand and many were born in New Zealand. Many Pacific Islander people speak English. Queensland has Australia's largest Pacific Islander and Maori population.

In 2009 the Queensland Government and subsequently Queensland Health identified, from the limited data available, that Australian South Sea Islander and Pacific Islander populations have the worst health status among CALD populations. Identifying these populations, not only in health datasets, but in other relevant datasets is important to better target interventions and measure outcomes. Similarly, well resourced place-based initiatives that aim to seek solutions to complex social problems such as homelessness, trans-generational unemployment, violence and poor child development outcomes are hampered by the inability to accurately identify the cultural diversity within these target areas.

As a multicultural organisation, MDA collects country of birth, ethnicity, ethnic group, religion, first language, second language and interpreter required. We would not be able to operate an effective service if we only collected the recommended minimum *National Standards for Cultural and Language Diversity*.

We understand that a number of Queensland Government agencies are also collecting ethnicity, or variables describing ethnicity, in an effort to better identify cultural and ethnic groups. Queensland Police Service (self-identified ethnicity), Refugee Health Clinics (self identified cultural identity) Peri-natal Health Services (ethnicity of mother and father) and the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre (ethnicity) all collect an additional variable to identify cultural and ethnic groups.

Although the standards stipulate that using “a single standard variable, such as country of birth ... is inadequate” (p. 8), in practice this has been the widespread level of implementation of the standards. In the health sector for example, a review of national health data dictionaries, national data sets and national surveys found¹:

- Seven national data dictionaries used ABS standards and classifications. Only one included all the minimum data set indicators for CALD.
- Of 17 national datasets reviewed, 12 included country of birth, three also included language but none included all three indicators
- Two data sets (injury surveillance and cancer) did not include any data concerning the client’s cultural background

Short term solution: collect ‘ethnicity’ in the next Census in addition to country of birth and ancestry.

In short, the standards have not been implemented as intended, and ‘country of birth’ is often used as a single variable. Given the evidence of poor implementation, the standards should be redesigned to provide another variable in the minimum data set that can better identify ethnic groups. This should be included in the next Census to determine the effectiveness of collecting ethnicity along with country of birth.

The use of ‘country of birth’ as an indicator of CALD populations is problematic as it is only one of several factors that may influence ethnicity (Bhopal, 2007; Ministry of Health, 2004). Country of birth is closely related to ethnicity only when international migration is uncommon. This is no longer the case in many countries, particularly Australia.

Long-term solution - ancestry transferred into the minimum data set and changed to ethnicity

MDA proposes that ABS explores the utility of:

- moving ancestry to the minimum data set
- changing ancestry to ethnicity

If ethnicity is not moved to the minimum data set, but remains in the standard data set, it will remain an uncollected item in most collections.

Long term solution: transfer ethnicity to the minimum data set with a focus on a person’s *current* identification.

It is recommended that ancestry be changed to ethnicity. There is a complex relationship between ancestry, ethnicity and cultural identity, as set out in the *Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups* (ASCCEG). While ancestry and ethnicity overlap, they are also different. “ASCCEG is designed to be used for the classification of information relating to a number of topics such as ancestry, ethnic identity, and cultural diversity. Although these topics have elements of difference, it is considered that the fundamental concept common to them all, and thus underpinning the classification, is ethnicity”.^{2(p4)} Reflecting this, while under the ASCCEG ancestry is asked, responses are classified according to ethnicity². This is an unexplained inconsistency and we propose that it would be preferable to collect ethnicity directly in ASCCEG.

In addition, ancestry has a focus on fore bearers and heritage. Ethnicity has a focus on one's own current identification, not the identification of ancestors. For the purposes of government agencies and their service provision, *current* identification is more important as it shapes lifestyle choices, behaviours, belief systems, relationships and social systems.

The collection of ethnicity will contribute greatly to the availability of better quality data on CALD communities, and particularly, identify populations that are currently invisible. The advantages of using ethnicity include being able to capture the following groups:

- children born in Australia but brought up in a non-English speaking cultural environment
- ethnic minorities who migrated from countries such as New Zealand, UK, and USA who affiliate with their cultural background and ethnicity
- ethnic minorities who can only be identified by ethnicity or sometimes language, for example refugees who were persecuted because of their ethnicity (e.g. Karen born in Thailand).

Collecting ethnicity would bring Australia in line with comparable countries. There is a preference internationally in comparable countries to Australia for the collection of 'ethnicity' as a primary indicator of cultural diversity³⁻⁵ (Attachment 1).

Why this change is needed

As a data user and leader in the multicultural sector, MDA has found that many data collections and research reports do not capture CALD adequately. The implications of not capturing reliable CALD data are that the needs of populations from a CALD background will remain poorly documented and understood. Their needs will remain unexpressed and in particular areas will be rolled up into the low socioeconomic status datasets without the opportunity to examine whether there are distinct needs and therefore the need for dedicated approaches that are culturally appropriate. The paucity of reliable data presents a significant hindrance to local, state and national investment in the socio-economic wellbeing of CALD populations. Furthermore, it is not possible to determine whether policies and strategies relevant to CALD populations are effectively implemented as there is virtually no reporting by all levels of Government⁶.

As services and agencies in Queensland have already moved to creating their own additional variables to capture ethnicity, it would be preferable for the national standards to incorporate ethnicity so that data collections can remain uniform and consistent with the national standards.

Further information

[redacted text]

References

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